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# Cryptozoology and the Paranormal in Harry Potter: Truth and Belief at the Borders of Consensus

Peter Dendle

> *"Harry and I were raised by Muggles," Hermione reminded him. "We were taught different superstitions."* (*DH* 414)[1]

J. K. Rowling's world of Harry Potter—a shadow world of wizards, witches, fantastic creatures, and monsters of all sorts, a world superimposed on and coexisting beside English society of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—has been read in a number of ways, including as social satire, political parable, and moral allegory. The novels collectively form a Bildungsroman for many so-called millennials; almost an entire generation of children has been raised watching Harry grow up alongside them. Rowling has made magic wands, dragons, and castles intimately relevant again for a generation saturated with cell phones, instant messaging, and YouTube. Structurally, the works draw significantly from mystery novels, as Harry and his friends must piece together clues that culminate in a series of revelations at the climax of each book, often involving learning the identity of the true villain of that particular installment. The combination of this structure with the schoolroom setting and its accompanying focus on books, curricular requirements, exams, and academic progression supports the often-made critical claim that the Harry Potter series is largely about learning and knowing. Knowledge in this light cannot be separated from authority figures, both legitimate and illegitimate, and from societal consensus as a whole. But in the cracks between the known and the unknown lies a blurry region of contested truths. Rowling exploits this liminal region through her inclusion of the paranormal—especially divination and cryptozoology—to raise issues of knowledge building in the individual and society. The presence of conflicting authorities and conflicting truth claims are initially puzzling to a bright, curious protagonist such as Harry, but Rowling provides implicit guidance for evaluating such claims.

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Lisa Hopkins has argued that knowledge acquisition is one of the principal themes of the series. Though inherited talent does seem to play a part, it is the protagonists' perseverance in negotiating challenges to actively acquire new knowledge that fuels the narrative progression. Sarah Maier views the disciplinary and institutional structure of Hogwarts as essential to Harry's educational development—without it, the innate magical abilities of an adolescent wizard would potentially be subject to misuse through caprice, ignorance, and the passions of youth. Charles Elster agrees that "The Harry Potter books depict a complex world of knowledge and knowers. Knowledge is depicted as multilayered and multifunctional" (204), but he argues instead that the traditional school structures and sanctioned authority figures hinder rather than foster the acquisition of the most useful pieces of knowledge. Important knowledge is invariably forbidden knowledge; it is that which adults and teachers try to hide from children, not that which they dispense (216). Only by circumventing and duping the intellectual authorities can Harry solve each task and eventually save the wizarding world, through the process of acquiring "life learning." For Elster, Harry and his friends must be bold enough to supplement their book learning with knowledge that cannot be found in books.

In the context of the series' sustained tensions surrounding knowledge and authority, Rowling's inclusion of the paranormal, including cryptozoology (the study of unconfirmed species, such as the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, etc.), serves to highlight some epistemological tensions in our own Muggle world. More importantly, it reinforces consensus knowledge at the societal level as being secure overall even if individuals or groups attempt to distort truth, whether from personal prejudice or ideological motive. Though Harry, Hermione, and others do contend with competing accounts of what is real during their maturation process, the world they inhabit is ultimately one in which objective reality is knowable. The deliberate sophistries of polemicists (such as Dolores Umbridge) are publicly revealed as bankrupt, while the innocent mistakes of more sympathetic characters (such as Luna Lovegood) are embraced as harmlessly endearing. Although there is room for a diversity of opinions in the wizard world, Rowling carefully provides the reader enough information to allow for resolution of the basic questions of what exists and what does not. In the course of doing so, however, she explores with some nuance the issues that are raised in the establishment of consensus, both within the classroom and outside of it.

## The Paranormal: Holding Beliefs in Defiance of Consensus

Study of the paranormal (ghosts, psychics, astrology, extraterrestrials, cryptozoology, past life experiences, etc.) raises some fundamental questions about viable sources of knowledge and about the nature of intellectual authority in the contemporary world. The role of the supernatural in fiction shifted significantly following the Enlightenment, when the inclusion of narrative elements such

as ghosts, omens, or connections with other worlds became increasingly seen as exclusively literary devices. Gothic fiction banked on characters remaining uncertain about what was real, while at the same time largely presuming that the contemporary reader knew better, and its descendent genre horror does the same. In the meantime, however, the increasing scientific dismissal of the paranormal and similar folk sciences over the past two-and-a-half centuries has done little to lessen the popularity of those beliefs.[2] In fact, it has been argued that part of the draw of pseudosciences is that they help deflect feelings of disempowerment, and provide a perceived sense of control in a world in which truth is largely dictated through scientific, medical, and academic communities whose methods and inner workings are largely inaccessible to most people.[3]

For many educated people, quotidian knowledge is equated implicitly with what science has shown to be supported by evidence.[4] Thus most people tend to accept electrons and quasars as real, while rejecting the four humors and the ether as historical artifacts. Contemporary paradigms of mainstream science have evolved as models of describing natural processes and their purported underlying mechanisms, models which drive the research programs of any given generation. These constructs (and few good scientists refer to their working models as "truth") are supported by the massive funding infrastructure of governmental research grants, private industry initiatives, and academic research programs, and are legitimized by peer-review evaluation practices and by the very discoveries, inventions, and technologies which they continuously produce. For the most part, these mainstream sciences are all mutually supportive; geology does not insist on a different periodic table of the elements from that of biochemistry, and optics does not posit types of energy unknown to other branches of physics. Compared to these sciences, the pseudosciences hold a pale candle. Small but determined bands of amateur enthusiasts form ghost and psychic research societies—and the Internet has fostered a boom industry for these groups—but in the relative absence of academic training, rigorous methodology, legitimate peer-review support networks, and (perhaps most telling) in the absence of replicable positive results over time, these groups generally are not taken seriously by mainstream science.[5]

Cryptozoology is among the more popular branches of the paranormal, and plays a significant role in the Harry Potter series. The field has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in the Internet age; enthusiasts come together online to pool information on chupacabra sightings, to watch twenty-four-hour streaming coverage of Loch Ness, or to discuss their recent experiences from a weekend Bigfoot or Jersey Devil hunt. Cryptozoology Web sites are alive with fascination and open-mindedness, fueled by a palpable thirst for confirming the existence of large and exotic species among us, even in the overcharted, overdeveloped twenty-first century. The track record of cryptozoology as a predictive science is, however, not good. Even though proponents regularly point back to the historical discovery of other species that surprised naturalists at the time—such as the coelacanth, okapi, and mega-mouth shark—the new

species that are discovered on an ongoing basis bear little correspondence to those that the cryptozoologists are looking for, which are mostly drawn from folklore and mythology.

Cryptozoologists did not, for instance, anticipate the orange-faced honeyeater bird or the Indonesian variant of the golden-mantled tree kangaroo (*Dendrolagus pulcherrimus*) discovered in a 2006 expedition to Papua New Guinea, or the giant (3.1-pound, 2-foot-long) rat species discovered on a Conservation International expedition in Papua province in late 2007. Instead, what enthusiasts were looking for most actively in New Guinea from 1994 to 2004 was a putative 30-foot-long or more nocturnal, bioluminescent pterosaur, the ropen.[6] The ongoing discovery of such remarkable species as the Pompeii worm (*Alvinella pompejana*) residing in deep-sea thermal vent systems, or the limbless lizard of the genus Sepsophis discovered in India's Orissa state in 2007, attests to a rich diversity of living creatures, even in this age of dramatic ecological change. In contrast, cryptozoologists devote much of their time and resources to large, mysterious, and potentially dangerous creatures that are better explained through the processes of folkloric transmission, psychological projection, and archetypal patterning than by the increasingly implausible claims that, well into the twenty-first century, mythological and fabled specimens simply happen to have eluded detection so far.

There are certainly scam artists, attention seekers, amateur enthusiasts, and other uncritical devotees populating the various industries and organizations associated with cryptozoology and the paranormal, but alongside these, there is also a small minority of well-meaning and well-trained researchers, more or less equipped with academic credentials and sound research methods, who have a somewhat more legitimate claim to feeling excluded from mainstream science.[7] Few peer-reviewed journals will accept research articles on, say, residual ghost energy, crystal power, applied numerology or sign-reading, ancient astronauts, or past lives. There are some exceptions; the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, the *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, and the *Journal of UFO Studies*, for instance, provide critical forums for the publication of systematic research in nontraditional fields.[8] The now defunct journal *Cryptozoology: Interdisciplinary Journal of the International Society of Cryptozoology* was a briefly running peer-reviewed publication for the study of cryptids; there are also small-scale cryptozoology periodicals and newsletters that range widely in content and quality.[9]

For the most part, though, those conducting research in the paranormal must band together separately in small societies, and they must review each other's work. In such a climate, incestuous research programs, cliquish factionalism, and petty rivalries inevitably complicate the already difficult research environment of poor funding, media suspicion, and public stigmatization. Proponents of paranormal research claim that the entrenched circle of peer review—which is required both for mainstream publication and large-scale funding, and which is successful only when grounded in accepted paradigms—inherently impedes

the discovery of new processes or phenomena that have shown some positive results but do not fit comfortably within the current models. The argument is that control over publication and distribution venues equates to control over public truth. This maxim applies as well to the totalitarian regime in the later books of the Harry Potter series, though the regime is never fully able to suppress independent voices thanks to Xenophilius Lovegood's underground publication of *The Quibbler*.[10] The marginalized presence of the paranormal raises issues of deferential trust in authority, and highlights potential weaknesses in public truth that predominate in the contemporary world.

The paranormal can serve as a valuable foil for mainstream scientific beliefs, drawing attention to both the limitations of empirical science and the constructed nature of academic consensus. It also provides a liminal space for folkloric beliefs that many individuals find empowering, and often provides a sense of a shared past and a present community. Rowling is sensitive both to the human dimension of beliefs which many people hold very dear—beliefs which can give meaning to people's lives—and to the importance nonetheless of an objective, unified account of reality.

## The Paranormal in Harry Potter

In the Harry Potter series, Rowling shrewdly incorporates tensions of knowledge and authority related to the paranormal, focusing on divination and cryptozoology in particular. These narrative threads serve to reinforce broader themes of authority in the wizard world, in which—just as in the Muggle world—conflicting sources of information make a single and universally accepted account of truth difficult amid different authorities with vested interests and competing goals. But although truth is difficult to sort out, it is not impossibly out of reach. Hers is not a world of subjective relativism. On the surface, the paranormal threatens to problematize accounts of objective reality by revealing the flaws in the very idea of consensus or of the sciences themselves as uniform, as noninterpretive endeavors. This would be the final effect, if Rowling did not include evaluative cues in assessing real vs. sloppy science.

There is proper science in the wizard world; Dumbledore, for instance, is famous for having discovered the twelve uses of dragon's blood.[11] There are also pseudosciences, such as the divination practiced and taught by Professor Trelawney. Trelawney shrouds herself in an affected air of ethereal mystery, which Rowling clearly paints as theatrical: "'I have been crystal-gazing, Headmaster,' said Professor Trelawney, in her mistiest, most faraway voice . . ." (*PA* 169). While credulous Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown are stricken with Trelawney's Divination class, clear-sighted Hermione sees through the whole thing as a sham: "I think Divination seems very woolly . . . a lot of guesswork, if you ask me" (*PA* 85). Ron comes to agree shortly afterwards ("She's a right old fraud," *PA* 236), and Harry comes around in the next book: "But Hermione was right, Harry thought irritably, Professor Trelawney really was an old fraud" (*GF* 177). The characters' opinions are eventually confirmed by the narrative

voice: "[Harry and Ron] both knew that Professor Trelawney was an old fraud" (*OP* 282). Hermione has served from the outset as a baseline for common sense and intellectual rigor. It is Harry, most importantly, who has to catch up, and this allows the reader to observe the paranormal dialectic process in action. In the course of this process, the reader can watch likeable characters acting in good faith who disagree with each other more or less respectfully about what does and does not exist in the world, without abandoning the important tenet that one side can—and indeed, must—be mistaken.

Trelawney's excuses for why her predictions do not seem to come true very often will be familiar to anyone who has spent much time reading paranormal apologetics; those who show signs of skepticism, for instance, are dismissed as not having intuitive insight or an open mind. When Trelawney announces that a "Grim" (a spectral dog) has appeared in Harry's scrying cup, Hermione peeks in and observes that it doesn't look like a Grim. Trelawney's reply is dismissive: "You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future" (*PA* 83). Later in the same book, when Trelawney again insists that she sees the ominous Grim in a scrying ball, and again is challenged by Hermione, Trelawney attacks her as being incapable of appreciating matters allegedly beyond her capabilities:

> I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class, my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly Mundane. (*PA* 220)

Elsewhere Trelawney rails against what she calls the "Establishment" that is persecuting her, which she further explains as "those with eyes too clouded by the mundane to See as I See, to Know as I Know" (*OP* 325). Projecting a conspiratorial sense of entrenched interests using the rhetoric of "Establishment" recalls a common mindset for marginalized subcultures. In justifying her failed prophecies, Trelawney retrospectively fits tragic events—such as the death of Lavender's rabbit—into her prior vague pronouncements. (The predictions of Nostradamus and of other alleged prophets are regularly granted similar validation among their proponents.) Hermione tries to explain that the fit of the stated prophecy to the actual event is at best forced: "Well, look at it logically . . . I mean, Blinky didn't even die today, did he, Lavender just got the news today . . . and she *can't* have been dreading it, because it's come as a real shock" (*PA* 112; original emphasis). Such explanations usually do little to change the views of those who already have committed personally or emotionally.

Beyond Trelawney's own transparent contrivances to save appearances, two of the most respected adult authorities of the series, McGonagall and Dumbledore, place no stock in her psychic talents, or indeed in her discipline as a teachable science.[12] Divination is a field with at least enough general support to justify an OWL-level exam among fifth year students (*OP* 632), but Dumbledore confides to Harry that at one point, "it was against my inclination

to allow the subject of Divination to continue at all" (*OP* 740). Trelawney is painted increasingly with signs of alcohol dependency, in parallel with major characters increasingly ignoring her delusions.[13]

Ironically, Trelawney enters a spirit trance on two occasions, and—despite herself—is actually the conduit for genuine prophecies. On those occasions there is a quality to her voice notably different from her usual classroom affectation, and she is entirely unaware of what is happening. On the first occasion,

> . . . a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.
> "*It will happen tonight.*"
> Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth sagging . . .
> Professor Trelawney didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry stood there in a panic. She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure . . . then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own . . . (*PA* 238; original emphasis)

After this unsettling episode, she only comments, "so sorry, dear boy . . . the heat of the day, you know. I drifted off for a moment" (*PA* 238). Elsewhere, Trelawney arises from the Pensieve before Harry and Dumbledore and speaks:

> But when Sybill Trelawney spoke, it was not in her usual ethereal, mystic voice, but in the harsh, hoarse tones Harry had heard her use once before. (*OP* 741)
> Dumbledore quips to Harry, "Who'd have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise . . ." (*PA* 311).

There is, then, such a thing as genuine prescience or prophecy. As Hermione concedes, "we've just found out that there *are* real prophecies" (*OP* 748; original emphasis), and McGonagall adds, "True Seers are very rare" (*PA* 84). What is called into question is whether such isolated phenomena can be harnessed into a predictive science, and therefore a teachable science; if they can, this plays no part in the current Harry Potter series.[14] Every indication, however, is to the contrary. The apparent reality of isolated instances of prophecy serves to cast Trelawney's curricular reasoning and staged classroom manner into sharper relief as chicanery. For the reader, there is ample evidence that as a science, Divination provides nothing reliably useful or replicable; it survives as an academic discipline at Hogwarts simply by tradition and historical precedent.

The existence of a pseudoscience such as Divination, which Rowling is happy to exploit for humor, is quite funny in the midst of a wizard world filled with dragons, goblins, magic wands, and bubbling cauldrons. Even in this fantasy world, some things are real and others are only the stuff of legends perpetuated by the gullible. This poignant dynamic is perhaps nowhere as rich as in the case of cryptozoology, in that a subsection of the wizarding population chases after fabulous beasts that excite their imaginations, when in fact they are already surrounded by a breathtaking menagerie of wondrous creatures in their day-to-day lives. In that sense, they are not so different from us.

## Cryptozoology: Nonexistent Creatures in a World of Make Believe

Divination is an interesting test case for the more abstract distinction of science vs. pseudoscience in the series, because it arises in the context of academic instruction. There are some authorities who support it, and others who do not. The case is somewhat different for cryptozoology, which is not an academic discipline per se, although there is a robust presence of animals and monsters both at Hogwarts and around the globe. There are no academic proponents of putative or unconfirmed species; there is instead an interesting tension between academic science (as represented by Hogwarts) and the media (as represented by *The Quibbler*). The treatment of cryptozoology nonetheless reinforces themes similar to those Rowling suggests surrounding Divination. Disagreement about even basic entities in the world—often played out in the tension of competing authorities—does not mean that there is not an underlying, objective truth.

Authorities whose credentials are based in experience and empathy (Hagrid), as well as those whose credentials are based in academic imprimatur (Newt Scamander), are available to Harry and his friends to help them learn about what animals exist and what do not. In fact, there is ongoing fluidity between what is a person, an animal, and a thing—transformations and illusions are woven into the very fabric of the wizard world—and in this environment, the shape of the "real" appears to be always subject to change (Dendle, "Monsters" 164). In 2001, Rowling released *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, a short supplement to her regular series under the pseudonym Newt Scamander (though her real name appears on the copyright page), along with a brief companion piece, *Quidditch Through the Ages*, under the pseudonym Kennilworthy Whisp. These are the names of textbooks assigned at Hogwarts long familiar to readers, even if these slim pamphlets are light in tone, and—unless one is willing to suspend disbelief—hardly seem to correspond to the onerous tomes that Harry and his friends complain about all the time during their studies.

It is in *Fantastic Beasts* that Rowling first starts weaving cryptozoology into her narrative universe, though it becomes a prominent part of the novels themselves starting in 2003 with *Order of the Phoenix*. The putative author's introduction to *Fantastic Beasts* describes how hard wizards have to work to keep magical creatures from detection by Muggles. He notes that two persistent offenders are Tibet and Scotland (Rowling herself lives in the latter), for their inability to effectively cover up tracks of the yeti in the Himalayas and the kelpie in Loch Ness (*FB* xvii). Rowling is having fun with her real-world Muggle readership here, and when she describes the wizard world's discovery of Nessie's true identity:

> The world's largest kelpie is found in Loch Ness, Scotland. Its favourite form is that of a sea serpent . . . International Confederation of Wizard observers realised that they were not dealing with a true serpent when they saw it turn into an otter on the approach of a team of Muggle investigators and then transform back into a serpent when the coast was clear. (*FB* 24)

Rowling sends up the overactive imaginations of those who think they see a lake monster in Loch Ness by humoring them; the joke is a condescending sort of "yes—of course you saw something, sure you did." She is writing ostensibly about her fictional world, but in bringing in the fascination with the "kelpie" of Loch Ness so directly, the force of the entry is to deflate a popular story with a whimsical explanation.

A similar reenvisioning of the paranormal in a way that is both conciliatory and critical occurs a little later under the entry for "Mooncalves," nocturnal creatures who engage in a strange ritual:

> Mooncalves perform complicated dances on their hind legs in isolated areas in the moonlight. These are believed to be a prelude of mating (and often leave intricate geometric patterns behind in wheat fields, to the great puzzlement of Muggles). (*FB* 29–30)

The phenomenon of crop circles—especially popular in England, and associated variously with UFOs, fairies, and the spiritual awakening of a world consciousness—is here deglorified, recast as a mating ritual. The entry seems to justify the beliefs of those who subscribe to crop circles as a real event, but the comical image of "mooncalves" dancing on their hind legs is satirical to the point of parody.

In this supplementary work, Rowling connects her fantasy world to our own world of fantasy, by intertwining her creatures with our tabloid culture and our propensity toward urban legends. If mooncalves and kelpies are not essential to the plot of the main series, a stance of skeptical and cautious curiosity is. This is one of Harry's more consistent character traits, and it carries him through more serious conflicts: knowing who to trust, what to believe, and how to come down on one side or the other. The abstract concepts involved in epistemological disagreement over the paranormal and the cryptozoological have broader and more practical repercussions, both in Harry's world and in ours. From the point of view of the intellectually curious such as Harry, though, the issues can only be approached initially by relying on different authorities, and in becoming more critically aware of their rhetoric and entrenched motives.

Harry's eccentric friend Luna Lovegood—a loyal compatriot, though hardly an intellectual heavyweight—and her father Xenophilius are the representatives of cryptozoological enthusiasm in the Harry Potter series, just as Trelawney represents belief in divination. Luna is an empathetic character; her interest in animals is reminiscent of Hagrid's.[15] But Luna is also a dreamer, largely living in her own world, and believing in all manner of animals that do not actually exist. Even in her delightfully unselfconscious acknowledgment of her own state of perpetual befuddlement, she refers to nonexistent creatures:

> "Wrackspurt got you?" asked Luna sympathetically, peering at Harry through her enormous coloured spectacles.
> "I—what?"

> "A Wrackspurt . . . they're invisible, they float in through your ears and make your brain go fuzzy," she said. "I thought I felt one zooming around in here." She flapped her hands at thin air as though beating off large invisible moths. Harry and Neville caught each other's eye and hastily began to talk of Quidditch. (*HBP* 167–68)

Despite herself, Luna draws vivid attention to her own lack of mental clarity, and provides a glimpse into what sorts of things go on in her head.

Like many paranormal proponents, Luna relies for her belief system on reports from others. She no doubt inherits many beliefs from her father. An implicit tenet is that the sheer number of reported eyewitness testimonies present and past—often from witnesses of perceived good character, who have no incentive to lie and who are not otherwise unreliable—represents compelling evidence. Rowling exposes this psychological propensity in *Order of the Phoenix*, when Luna refers off-handedly to Cornelius Fudge's alleged army of Heliopaths. Neville asks what Heliopaths are: "'They're spirits of fire,' said Luna, her protuberant eyes widening so that she looked madder than ever, 'great tall flaming creatures that gallop across the ground burning everything in front of—'" (*OP* 308). When Hermione denies their existence, Luna responds that "There are plenty of eye-witness accounts." She is unaware of the adaptable and impressionable nature of human cognitive perception, as individuals or in group situations, or of the uncertain vicissitudes of story transmission inherent in urban legends. Instead, Luna becomes defensive, turning to an ad hominem attack on Hermione: "Just because you're so narrow-minded you have to have everything shoved under your nose before you—" (*OP* 308).[16] This sort of strategy is well known to the community of academics, scientists, and doctors who often are portrayed in popular paranormal apologetics as politically or economically motivated, cliquish, and blinded by institutionally entrenched tunnel vision. Such are the accusations of Luna's father Xenophilius.

Xenophilius is editor of *The Quibbler*, which is first prominent in the series as a tabloid rag, but which ultimately comes to represent one of the few public voices willing to stand against the oppressive state in *Deathly Hallows*. Himself personally interested in unconfirmed species, Xenophilius devotes excessive energy to tracking down the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. He even goes on an (apparently unsuccessful) expedition to Sweden to catch one (*OP* 747). Similarly, Luna is a staunch defender of all things implausible, almost blissful in her self-contained state of denial: "You can laugh . . . but people used to believe there were no such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack!" (*OP* 236). Though the reader is kept in doubt at some moments, it is quite certain that Hermione is vindicated by the end of the series; there is no good reason to think that those creatures exist, and every reason to think that Luna and Xenophilius are simply "open-minded" to the point of unquestioning credulity. As Ginny puts it, "apparently [Luna]'ll only believe in things as long as there's no proof at all" (*OP* 236).

To be sure, Xenophilius is right to believe in some legends, such as the accounts of the Deathly Hallows woven into *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, which for most wizards is just a set of children's stories (*DH* 406–11). He is also right to stand by Harry, when almost everyone else has turned against him. However, Rowling demonstrates that the mystical creatures he devotes so much attention to are merely the product of rumor and fancy. For instance, Xenophilius purchases what is said to be the horn of a Crumple-Horned Snorkack, but which proves instead to be the (highly explosive) horn of an Erumpent, as Hermione had warned (*DH* 401). Confirmation that it is from an Erumpent comes both from the explosion (*DH* 420) and from a direct reference to it as "the Erumpent horn" in the narrative voice (*DH* 419). The artifact's real identity should have been evident from the grooved markings around the base, which Hermione knows from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Xenophilius is blinded by his own desire for the strange and unknown to exist. His arguments, in fact, parallel many of those in cryptozoology apologetics in our Muggle world. In defending the existence of Deathly Hallows, Xenophilius accuses Hermione of being "not unintelligent, but painfully limited. Narrow. Close-minded" (*DH* 410). Tellingly, in defending the Snorkack to Hermione shortly prior to this, the look on his own face was described as "mulish"—a symbol of stubbornness (*DH* 401). In short order, he serves up another chestnut of paranormal apologetic in defending his Deathly Hallows: the *Argumentum ab ignorantio*.[17] Detractors cannot prove that the putative entity or power does *not* exist:

> "All right," said Hermione, disconcerted. "Say the Cloak existed . . . what about the stone, Mr. Lovegood? The thing you call the Resurrection Stone?"
> "What of it?"
> "Well, how can it be real?"
> "Prove that it is not," said Xenophilius.
> Hermione looked outraged.
> "But that's—I'm sorry, but that's completely ridiculous! How can I possibly prove it doesn't exist?" (*DH* 411)

The twist here is that, while Hermione is right that Xenophilius is using perverted logic, the Resurrection Stone does indeed turn out to exist. And in this sort of reversal, just as the reader is about to see the Snorkack myth (and horn) dramatically exploded in only a few pages, Rowling leaves room for ambiguous interpretation. Some readers may well come out of the Harry Potter series believing that, just because Xenophilius never caught a Snorkack, and just because the horn he purchased was in fact an Erumpent horn, those facts do not mean conclusively that Snorkacks don't exist.[18] And so the pseudosciences can thrive in the space of imagination and desire.

## Conclusion

Rowling uses the existence of putative cryptids and the paranormal more generally to raise questions of knowledge and critical thinking, which become

entwined with related issues about being able to trust a given adult, a teacher, or even an entire political administration. There are no overarching authorities who can provide final answers to Harry and his friends, although some trusted individuals such as Dumbledore can provide guidance. The august luminaries whose writings are so respected that they are incorporated as texts at Hogwarts also provide a great deal of valuable information, at least in terms of documenting the sum total of collected learning. They represent something close to the scholarly consensus for the wizarding community. Even this source, however, is not infallible, as it includes not just proper authorities such as the reputable Newt Scamander, but also fraudulent hacks such as Gilderoy Lockhart, whose Defense Against the Dark Arts accounts are pure fabrication. Dumbledore's experience and Hermione's common sense are necessary counterweights for evaluating the reliability of institutionally disseminated knowledge.

The paranormal superstitions within the Harry Potter series are fairly harmless, associated with quirky personality types rather than with level of education or ideological motive. In answer to a fan's question during a live chat hosted by Bloomsbury, Rowling indicated that after the events within the series had concluded, Luna Lovegood became a naturalist, and "ended up marrying . . . a fellow naturalist and grandson of the great Newt Scamander." There is closure here on the Crumple-Horned Snorkack issue, at least for those who consider such off-hand authorial comments authoritative: Luna "discovered and classified many new species of animals (though, alas, she never did find a Crumple-Horned Snorkack and had, finally, to accept that her father might have made that one up)" ("J. K. Rowling and the Live Chat"). The joining of superstition and authority in the marriage between Luna and Newt Scamander's grandson represents a gesture of compromise. Rowling's world is large enough for a diversity of beliefs—in which characters such as Luna can view the world through "colored spectacles" (*HBP* 167–68)—but in the end there is such a thing as knowable, objective truth.

The current generation of young readers, who with a few clicks are granted immediate access to much more information than was ever imaginable in the past, faces a host of new challenges in deciding how to sort, sift, and organize the information that will create their worldview. Harry's world is also one of incomplete information and conflicting authorities, a puzzle which requires continuous interrogation and reassessment. The Internet age essentially represents a renewed period of "orality"—freely exchanged ideas in ever-changing iterations, unfiltered by the scientific or academic elite, a democracy of ideas that is fresh and exciting but which also reinvigorates folklore and superstition. Rowling cleverly exploits the superstitions of the contemporary world in her inclusion of pseudocreatures and poor reasoning skills, even within a world steeped in fantastic beasts and unfathomable mysteries. (There is something perfectly delicious in the fact that Rowling's term "Muggle" has gained popularity in circles of paranormal proponents as a label for nonbelievers.) Competing claims concerning reality emanate from various layers of Harry's supervisory

hierarchy: family, friends, school, and government. It is within this none too stable hierarchy that Rowling situates tensions of entrenchment, vested interest, and the creation of public truth. If the series is a tale of Harry's ongoing education and maturation, though, the puzzles are largely solved at its conclusion. Epistemological and social stability are largely restored. If there is plenty of room for conceptual "play," there is also a time for the play to come to an end.

## Notes

1. The Harry Potter editions consulted herein are abbreviated as follows: *PS*: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*; *PA*: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*; *GF*: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*; *OP*: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*; *HBP*: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*; *DH*: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*; *FB*: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.

2. In a 2005 Gallup poll, around three out of every four Americans proclaimed belief in at least one paranormal phenomenon. The most popular beliefs in that poll were ESP (41% of those polled), haunted houses (37%), ghosts (32%), and telepathy/mental communication (31%). Astrology enjoyed a 25% belief rating, but cryptozoology was not distinctly specified as an option on that survey. See Moore, "Three in Four Americans."

3. See comments in Daegling, *Bigfoot Exposed*, 256–57, and Dendle, "Cryptozoology," 200. For broader psychological issues behind paranormal beliefs, see Carlton, *The Paranormal*.

4. We need not concern ourselves here with those contested points of fact arising from religious beliefs, which only represent a tiny fraction of people's working knowledge base. In Rowling's wizard world, there are cultural and spiritual differences, but no recognizable religions.

5. Serious academic and military attention was devoted to some parapsychological phenomena (such as psychic ability) in the mid-twentieth century, and legacies survive in some instances—for example, the Rhine Research Center, descended from the erstwhile Duke University Parapsychology Lab; see Beloff, *Parapsychology*. Numerous associations such as the American Institute of Parapsychology in Florida offer certificate programs in parapsychology, but according to the Rhine Research Center, there are currently no degrees offered in the field at accredited American institutes of higher education; see Auerbach, "Education in Parapsychology." However, in 1969 the Parapsychological Association was granted affiliation status with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which it still enjoys (see Irwin and Watt 249). Among the more popular paranormal topics (e.g., ghosts, ESP/telepathy, astrology, UFOs), parapsychology perhaps lends itself most readily to controlled studies, and therefore has claimed the greatest relative legitimacy as a science. The vast majority of amateur enthusiasts who purport to be conducting research (e.g., weekend ghost hunters with electromagnetic field detectors and night-vision cameras) do more to undermine the credibility of those branches of study than to legitimize them.

6. See Whitcomb, *Searching for Ropens*, and his brief summary at <http://www.cryptozoology.com/cryptids/ropen.php>.

7. On the relationship between paranormal studies and mainstream science, see Bauer, *Science or Pseudoscience*; Hines, *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal*; and Shermer, *Borderlands of Science*.

8. The London-based *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* has been published since 1884; the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* is published by the International Association for Near-Death Studies, Inc., founded in 1981; and the *Journal of UFO Studies* has been issued by The J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies in Chicago since 1979 (though, I gather, not continuously). On the other hand, research on paranormal beliefs (e.g., factors contributing to such beliefs, demographics, etc.) is vibrant, regularly enjoying publication in mainstream psychology journals.

9. Examples include *Cryptozoologica* (*Revue francophone de Cryptozoologie*), published by ABEPAR (*L'Association Belge d'Etude & de Protection des Animaux Rares* [The Belgian Association for the Study and Protection of Rare Animals]) since 1994, originally monthly but now (roughly) quarterly; the *Bigfoot Co-Op* Newsletter, published in hand-typed, photocopied format for some quarter of a century, though retired in 2005; and the newsletter of the British Columbia Scientific Cryptozoology Club, in its sixty-fifth issue as of this writing.

10. See, for instance, "Xeno is printing all the stuff the *Prophet*'s ignoring, not a single mention of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks in the last issue" (*DH* 299).

11. This is mentioned when Harry first climbs aboard the Hogwarts Express, and is given a Chocolate Frog containing a trading card listing Dumbledore's greatest accomplishments (*PS* 77). Hermione later memorizes the twelve uses as part of the first-year curriculum (*PS* 167).

12. Hermione tells Harry, "[Divination] sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that's a very imprecise branch of magic" (*PS* 190); for Dumbledore, see *PA* 311.

13. In *Order of the Phoenix* and *Half-Blood Prince*, Trelawney frequently smells of sherry or exhibits signs of alcohol-related dysfunction: "Professor Trelawney was standing in the middle of the Entrance Hall with her wand in one hand and an empty sherry bottle in the other, looking utterly mad. Her hair was sticking up on end, her glasses were lopsided so that one eye was magnified more than the other; her innumerable shawls and scarves were trailing haphazardly from her shoulders, giving the impression that she was falling apart at the seams" (*OP* 524). Eventually she is caught trying to hide her sherry bottles in the Room of Requirement (*HBP* 639). Rowling continues: "Harry caught a powerful whiff of sherry even though the bottles had been left behind" (*HBP* 642).

14. Astrology as the centaurs practice it is very different from Trelawney's art, yet it fares no better. That species spends decades gazing at the skies, almost as a cult, and their art leads not to practical advice or usable information but to grand philosophical pronouncements about the ultimate ineffability of the cosmos: "[Firenze's] priority

did not seem to be to teach them what he knew, but rather to impress upon them that nothing, not even centaurs' knowledge, was foolproof" (*OP* 532).

15. Hagrid "serves as one of the main ambassadors to the world of magical creatures. He is their steward and advocate, and (on some unfortunate occasions) their cheerfully resilient chew-toy" (Dendle, "Monsters," 165).

16. Explanation of the constructive nature of perception and of the psychological factors that can contribute to such experiences in the first place, such as confirmation bias (the disproportionate weight we lend to evidence that supports our presuppositions, while unconsciously ignoring counterevidence); the Forer effect (the tendency for people to think that general statements fit them in particular); the availability error (granting undue weight to evidence that is vivid or immediately present, rather than what is categorically typical); distortions of memory; and the general landscape of cultural presuppositions in which a given person is raised, somehow ring hollow for someone who thinks he or she has just been privileged to witness an extraterrestrial visitation or who has just been visited by a dead loved one. For these and other factors that skew the reliability of personal experience, see Schick and Vaughn, *How to Think about Weird Things,* 35–81.

17. There is also a burden-of-proof fallacy, which in such cases overlaps with the *Argumentum ab ignorantio*. The burden is not on a detractor to demonstrate that an unusual or exotic entity does not exist, but on a proponent to demonstrate that it does.

18. See, for instance, an online poll hosted at *Fanpop.com* in April 2009—two years after the final installment of the series appeared—asking, "Do you think Crumple-Horned Snorkacks exist?" Out of 18 respondents, 12 selected "No" (67%) and 6 selected "Yes" (33%). The poll is still up, and inviting further participation, as of late August 2011: <http://www.fanpop.com/spots/harry-potter/picks/show/210583/think-crumple-horned-snorkacks-exist>.

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